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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes using dramatic situations for prewriting and writing assignments. Dramatic situations are defined as the process by which students, working in pairs, argue or discuss on paper in dialogue form a human question or problem. A sequence of exercises in several stages is outlined. First, students are divided into pairs and pass a single sheet of paper back and forth between themselves, writing spontaneous dialog in a short period of time. The students are then given more time and encouraged to make more complex statements responding to their partners' statements. Several topics are then suggested for writing a logical, subtle, complex, full length dialog. The final stage is the writing of an expository essay, combining appropriate formality with the rhythm and flow of oral language. (TS)

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Dramatic Situations for Pre-Writing and Writing Assignments

Teachers of composition have begun to face in recent years the need to devise alternative methods in order to close up the dusty files with titles like "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" or, on the college level, "How College Life Differs from High School." Certainly there is no panacea for clichéd writing, but large strides have been made in many directions, including pre-writing. Perhaps the most salutary effect of pre-writing is that it takes the topics of composition classes out of the sequestered security of dorm rooms and library study-carrels and places them within a public arena--even if that arena consists of only a small group of classroom peers.

In my college freshman writing classes, I have found dramatic situations the most effective pre-writing technique. Although the place of drama in English education has been discussed at length by a number of notable composition theorists such as James Moffett, Charles Duke, or Charles Cooper, I would like to share with you the results of my experiments, and introduce some of the twists that, as far as I know, I have incorporated into this technique for the teaching of formal composition.

Pre-Writing

By the use of dramatic situations I am referring to a process by which students, working in pairs, argue or discuss on paper in dialogue form a human question or problem. The sequence of exercises and

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assignments is in four distinct stages. In the first pre-writing stage, I ask them to pair with a nearby classmate and, employing the "free writing" technique of Ken Macrorie in Telling Writing, quickly pass a single sheet of paper back and forth responding off the top of their heads to highly charged statements they have made about each other. This introduces the concept of role-playing, for I always caution them to make untrue statements about their partners. For example, student A might begin a mock argument with student B about the slovenliness of B's clothes when in fact B is neatly dressed. A brief word about tact has always prevented any hurt feelings.

The essential characteristic of this stage is that the dialogue should be spontaneous and not stifled by the often terrifying demand of saying clever things in well-balanced, periodic sentences. The exercise is done in less than ten minutes, followed by some oral performances. The humor which often results from two students exchanging put-downs in jest relaxes the class and accustomes everyone to hearing his voice in a relatively non-threatening, non-competetive situation. Here is part of a dialogue I had--on paper--with a student:

Student: Why do you wear that pocket-watch? What do you think, you're cool or something?

Instructor: Hey, don't knock it. That was my grandfather's.

Student: And another thing. You always come in here like the heavy teacher. You really think you're cool!

Instructor: My dear vessel of learning. How would you know? You're always asleep in class.

Student: What do you expect? The class is so damn boring.

Instructor: Any suggestions for improving it?

The second pre-writing stage gives more development to dialogues produced under similar conditions. Giving the students more time--ten or fifteen minutes--I ask them to make their statements longer, more complex, and more thoughtfully responsive to their partners' statements. To return to the example about the student's dress, the more sustained dialogue could lead into a brief written discussion of the role dress styles play in today's culture. Again, some of the dialogues are performed orally. This stage serves as a bridge between the spontaneous use of unstructured speech in the earlier stage, and the more demanding though processes of a sustained dialogue. The emphasis shifts from verbal jousting to more thoughtful content.

Dramatic Situations as Writing Assignments

The first two exercises, as pre-writing, prepare students for the third stage, a more formal, oral-written presentation of a dramatic situation. The student has had a chance to express ideas without codification, logical support, subtle rhetorical devices, or complex interaction dynamics. The more extended dramatic situation in a full-length assignment will hopefully add these qualities to the spontaneity of the pre-writing exercises. Here are some topics I have suggested to my students while encouraging them to modify or devise their own:

1. Two women have petitioned the Dean of Students for the right to join the university swimming team. The women have gained the Dean's support and have recently qualified for membership.

The news has divided the campus. Recreate a conversation between a traditional man and a liberated woman while the issue is still hot.

2. While cleaning your room one day while you're home for Christmas break, one of your parents has discovered a dog-eared copy of The Sensuous Woman (Man). You are certainly not promiscuous, but you have begun to question what you consider your parents' rather obsolete views on sexual morality. Capture the scene of confrontation that might result.
3. You are a supporter of stringent gun control laws and after moving into an off-campus apartment with a friend, you discover that he keeps a hand-gun in his bureau drawer. Debate the issue with him.

At this point the emphasis is on clear exposition of well-considered opinions. This is not to say that character cannot be depicted by the use of emotional responses or narrow prejudices. But the pros and cons of the situation should be clearly traced in dramatic form, where each statement evokes a pertinent response from the other person, and influences the dramatic progression of the dialogue.

An immediate problem the instructor faces is the selection of the pairs. Initially, it might seem ideal to assign a more competent student to work with one who is having difficulties, thus harnessing the teaching powers in his class. However, an assignment such as this depends as much on social interaction abilities as on verbal skills, and if students can choose partners with whom they feel comfortable, in most cases, previously unrealized verbal skills will still come to the

fore. Moreover, when students work in pairs, a cohesive environment causes them to assume a sense of responsibility, leading to more careful and thoughtful effort. Indeed, a minor high point one quarter was when a student came to me and tried to take all the blame for a careless typing job on which I had commented; she was afraid that because of her, her partner's grade had suffered! For that moment, I actually thought that the carniverous competition for grades might have been forgotten.

A second problem is rooted in the very nature of the American education system. Too often, the college teacher gets students with nearly all of their creativity crushed out of them. Consider this observation by M. S. Vaughan in "Creativity and Creative Teaching: A Reappraisal" (School and Society, April, 1969, p. 230):

> . . . our traditional programs in education are effective instruments of authoritarian society . . . they have been effective and efficient in producing quiet, orderly, and courteous children, rather than flexible, sensitive, and courageous individuals.

The result is that some students want cut-and-dried topics for which they can use the five-paragraph plan. For these students, I suggest an outline of main points the two speakers wish to present, and if necessary, a format similar to that of a debate. On the surface, it seems as though the outline is under-cutting the very basis of the assignment. However, I am content with small miracles, and if we recognize that a dramatic situation itself is a step out of rigid themes and egocentric points of view, we can still breathe a sigh of satisfaction.

During both the pre-writing and writing stages, the instructor should be not only a technical consultant for the class as a whole, but

a participant with one of the students as well. Robert Zoellner makes this statement in his now famous essay "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition" (College English, 30, 1969, pp. 267-320):

> . . . I have never, repeat never, seen a composition instructor . . . walk into a composition classroom cold-turkey, with no preparation . . . and then--off the top of his head--actually compose a paragraph which illustrates the rhetorical principles that are the current concern of the class (p. 310).

Since dramatic situations are a participatory activity, an instructor has no justification for sitting back and watching his students perspire.

Not to lose sight of the relationship between oral and written discourse, all of the dialogues are performed. The productions will usually be more elaborate than those of the pre-writing and will include some simple blocking, props, facial expressions, and even costumes--Dad in a cardigan sweater with leather elbows and Junior in prefaded jeans.

The Expository Essay

The dialogue as a full-length assignment moves in two directions; it is both an end product to the briefer pre-writing exercises, and a form of pre-writing exercise itself to the final stage, an expository essay. Since our concern is primarily with pre-writing, I will only state that the essay is structured around the ideas generated by the dialogue. If the instructor wishes to use this final stage, he should be aware that the scope of the dramatic situations will limit that of the essays; certain ones can give rise to essay topics which are thin on content. Students are encouraged to use the patterns of human speech

which developed in the extended dramatic situations. Of course, they formalize these patterns; diction is less colloquial and syntax is tighter. But the final goal is to combine appropriate formality with the rhythm and flow of an oral language which they recognize as genuine.

Theory

A library of materials has been written about the role of creative dramatics in the total emotional, creative, and psychological development of students. So rather than a rehash of theoretical justification for the therapeutic value of creative dramatics, I want to focus on the more immediate benefits that a structured use of dramatic situations can have for particular concerns you may face in teaching formal composition.

Ultimately, the purpose of writing is to preserve, communicate, or discover ideas, even if only for the writer in journal form. In evaluating the ideas of students' papers, one of the most distressing problems I often find is students' tendency to either over-generalize or over-simplify. When we insist that their writing is detailed, we see irrelevant detail which has not been sufficiently classified or codified; on the other hand, when we insist that they theorize or draw generalizations from the date of their experience, we see generalizations which are not drawn from any data that is presented. James Moffett, in Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), speculates on causes for this:

> Most of our faulty thinking, and consequently a lot of our ineffective behavior, come from confusing abstraction levels and assigning to a high-order inference the same truth value we assign to a lower-order "factual" abstraction about which public agreement would be high (p. 28).

> Growth, then, is toward a differentiation of kinds of discourse to match the differentiation in abstraction levels of thought (p. 50).

Moffett is suggesting that our students are frequently unable to know at what point they stand in a hierarchy of facts, generalizations, and theories. Dramatic situations are a progressive means of finding personal facts to build acceptable generalizations, and, if the students are good, workable theories at the essay level. Stages of abstraction should occur in this order, but we know that too often some students tend to make impulsive generalizations, then strain for lower-level facts in support of them.

The following reflections were made by one student who was role-playing a housewife alcoholic:

> . . . But then Ben's parents were killed in that crash. All of a sudden we had to put up with gossippy, old aunts and uncles and cousins. Everybody came to our house expecting me to take care of them. They wanted this, they wanted that . . . My temper ran short and I even started getting mad at Ben. I never even tried to talk to him about it . . . He just seemed to be a part of all that . . . [sic] pettiness. The day of the funeral, I'd had it. I poured myself a drink, and then another and then another . . . I don't even know if Ben noticed any of it . . . And when that happened, I started to drink [again].

This is an attempt to trace the causes of housewife alcoholism in human, concrete terms. Later, when the student wrote a more detached expository essay on the same topic, she was able to generalize causes, recognizing and qualifying them as generalizations based on the data of her

experience used in the dramatic situation. As a result, I like to think that she has a firmer grasp on levels of abstraction. More significantly, she may have a firmer grasp on when to use them. High-level abstractions would have been inappropriate in her confession to her sister-in-law, just as low-level abstractions would be in an essay which widens the distance between her and her audience. When our students can see the relationship between language and cognitive processes, perhaps they will also be able to see when to use an appropriate level of abstraction, given the distance of the audience which they are addressing.

Widespread doublespeak has reinforced students in the misconception that the most effective weapon in search of that Holy Grail represented by an A has been the thesaurus. We all know the results: tautologies, wordiness, misused Latinisms, malapropisms, and unwieldy intellectual lumber. Students know this is not the way people talk; instructors know it also. Perhaps the use of dramatic situations as prewriting assignments will help the student eliminate artifically imposed stylistic devices and woeful attempts at erudition. A dramatic situation forces him to use a language which more nearly duplicates the patterns of speech. This is not to denigrate the structured rhetorical devices of written discourse, but most of us recognize the need to bring the two into greater congruence, especially because speech precedes writing, both linguistically and psychologically. The direct transference of language that students make between oral dramatic situations and written expository essays will help them see, in their own hands, that there is indeed a connection between the student's language and that of the expository essay--minus the muddy theme jargon that our boots get mired in.

A third theoretical concern many of us face is our attempt to build an awareness of when different levels of formality, such as those suggested by Martin Joos in The Five Clocks, are appropriate. We can devise handouts with sentences expressed in various styles, but in a skill course such as composition, this is like trying to teach a student to play a musical scale by telling him the vibrations per second of each tone. Consider for a moment the subtle discrimination of style shown by these two students in a scene at a golf pro shop:

Joe: It sure is a crappy day. Why don't you close down? The boss wouldn't mind.

Will: Before I close I'd better get permission . . .

Joe: Oh, hell, just close down. How would the old man find out, anyway? Damn rain! Ruined the best round of golf I ever had . . .

Will: I suppose that you had no witnesses to verify that.

The devil-may-care athlete and the more introspective book-worm proceed from here to express philosophies of life, not only through statements of ideas, but through the styles in which their ideas are expressed. Students release their innate powers of code-switching, then see this power in operation under their own pens. They truly become our "supreme resources."

A fourth problem dramatic situations might help solve is point-of-view. As an occasional instructor of scientific writing, my concern for a detached, third person point of view has become especially acute. But in less specifically defined forms of writing, we have begun to realize that no single point of view is inherently more "correct" than others,

and that students need to flexibly use various points of view for given audiences, purposes, and subjects. The instructor can point out the interplay among various points of view necessary for all four stages of this sequence. This will help students to consciously use appropriate points of view in the essays as they shift from direct to indirect address.

Still another problem many of us face is the tension between teaching standard English to minorities, and growing recognition that any dialect is a viable language system in its own right. Many of us will agree that often our minority students appear--and I stress the word appear--to be almost non-verbal in the classroom. Thomas Kochman points out that the primacy given to formal written communication is a white middle-class norm minority dialect speakers often do not share, and as a result, they feel threatened by an alien classroom situation ("Culture and Communication: Implications for Black English in the Classroom," in Alfred C. Aarons, et al. eds., Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education, The Florida FL Reporter, vol. 7, no. 1, 1969, p. 89). But when minority students, and for that matter all students, are given the chance to use the full range of vivid oral and paralinguistic skills they possess, the results are frequently delightful. Dramatic situations bridge a gap between the prestige they attach to oral skills and the prestige the white culture attaches to written skills, frequently leading to more colorful and proficient writing by both groups.

Non-verbal behavior is in effect at both ends of the communication circuit during the oral performances of the dialogues. When I first began using this technique, I was puzzled about how I was going to evaluate the

results, especially since the course was in composition, not in oral interpretation, and since I still carry my ingrained schoolmarm instincts into a situation replete with slang, obscenity, sentence fragments, and other horrors. Suddenly, I realized that I did not have to do any evaluation, but had at least twenty-two capable evaluators sitting around me, laughing, yawning, wiggling, as well as discussing what their peers had done. In her study of The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders (Urbana: NCTE, 1971, p. 78), Janet Emig states that the members of her sample who did any writing other than school-sponsored writing viewed their peers as the most "significant others." It might prove worthwhile for composition teachers to exploit both this ego concern and this peer dynamics in a social setting where language really counts. Dramatic situations, with total involvement of both speakers and listeners, can be useful tools in developing the evaluative and critical resources of our students.

Conclusion

A temptation I will avoid is to provide numerical indicators of success that smack of self-fulfillment. Instead, let me close with these provocative and challenging words of James Moffett (p. 119):

> Ultimately a student . . . is more interested in his relation to other people than he is in a subject, because psychic survival and fulfillment depend on what kind of relation one works out with the social world . . . Instead of creating constant tension between the social motives of the student and his own motive to teach the "subject," the teacher would do better to acknowledge that his own intellectual pursuits are framed by dramatic relations between him and the world, and to recognize that this must be true for his students as well.